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Chapter Nineteen: Solo I

Rien n'a changé.

Il n'y avait aucune raison d'avoir peur, ni de remettre en question nos convictions.

Ce que j'ai ressenti a toujours été plus grand que n'importe quel secret que nous aurions pu essayer de cacher.

...

Il doit y avoir quelque chose qui nous attend tous les deux quelque part.

Quelque part que nous n'atteindrons jamais...

...

Ça ne veut pas dire que j'arrêterai de chercher cet endroit.

The first thing I did was get rid of my uniform.

It wasn't easy for me to change, although everything becomes much simpler when you force yourself to see the world through lenses that turn everyone into your enemy. Regardless of their appearance, demeanor, or attitude, that person will be after exactly the same thing as you, and they will never be willing to let you have it. When the cards are dealt that way, the only possible reaction is to kill.

You have to kill before they kill you. And do it fast—don't try to negotiate. That

stranger is thinking the exact same thing and is just waiting for you to let your guard down so they can drive a knife into your throat. You can't let that happen. You can't die out of pity, out of compassion. None of the goodness you might try to show will matter when you're lying on the ground, choking on your own blood, so don't make the mistake of showing yourself as someone kind. No, don't show yourself at all. They don't need to see you. It'll be much easier to take them out from behind.

The guilt will fade someday, and you'll have time to reflect on it once you can sit down and breathe without feeling like someone's watching you. Do whatever it takes to guarantee your survival, even if it means destroying everything you've been up until now.

I adopted that mindset the moment I stepped outside to look for food. Even so, it didn't stop me from crying the first time I killed another survivor.

I had already been on the road for a couple of weeks, heading south. I hadn't come across anyone, and for a while, I even thought no one else was still alive out there.

In that ghost town, in that store where almost nothing of value remained, I saw a shadow move in the corner, and before I realized what I was doing, I had already fired three shots in its direction. Only one bullet hit, piercing cleanly through the forehead of a gray-haired man dressed in rags. He didn't have anything on him—not food, not weapons, nothing. When I understood that there was no undoing what I had done, I pressed a hand to my face, trying to hold back the nausea, and left the place with tears in my eyes. I sat in the street, trying to calm myself down, repeating that dark mantra once again.

You have to kill. You have to kill before they kill you. It's not a crime if it's for your survival. There will be time for regret one day.

I was no longer myself.

What came next was... seeing a monster reflected in the eyes of my countless victims. Some attacked me first, but that wasn't always the case. I didn't kill for the pleasure of killing. I tried not to, especially when the other survivor was completely at my mercy, but I never hesitated to shoot if I felt even a hint of threat. Looking back now makes me feel sick. Not because of the act of taking lives itself, but because of how many times I went too far, driven by fear and hunger.

I ended more lives than I ever did while serving in the army.

. . .

These stories aren't important; I'm only writing them to remind myself of who I was, and who I've become.

January, 2023

I already felt desensitized. I could never convince myself that the people I fought against weren't truly human, but little by little, I managed to suppress the self-loathing that came after every kill. A few months after I separated from my platoon, I had fully become a killer. I wasn't the only one. The truth is, by then I was just another one of those out there. Shooting someone in the back no longer meant anything to me, and instead of guilt over the act itself, I felt more anxious about whether someone nearby had heard the gunshot and was already on their way.

Fortunately, or thanks to good logistical planning, it was relatively easy to find ammo for my pistol. That gave me a profound sense of security. As long as I had the ability to defend myself by opening fire, the only thing I could blame my downfall on would be my lack of skill.

But that never happened. I was always the one who came out on top.

"... twenty-four rounds. As long as I don't end up in a shootout, this should last me for a while."

I muttered to myself, my gaze fixed on the pistol resting on the table. The weapon lay there with a full magazine inside and a bullet in the chamber. I had an empty magazine in one of my pockets, and one that was a little over halfway full in my hand.

The outskirts of Vicenza, in a house like many others nearby. The city was silent, with no sign of military presence. The whole area was in a deplorable state, and I hadn't found anything of interest in the few houses I'd checked. Still, I felt calm. A few days ago, I'd finally come across a decent backpack. It was a school bag, medium-sized, and it finally allowed me to carry some supplies on my journey. I had food and water, enough that I didn't have much to worry about for... maybe a week, I think. I'd only stopped to rest and take stock of my inventory, nothing more.

At that moment, all I really wanted was to find a pack of cigarettes, but I hadn't had any luck with that either.

The dining room was just as messy as the rest of the house; the windows were broken, letting the breeze in. At least the table and the three chairs around it were intact, though I would've preferred cushioned chairs instead of those uncomfortable wooden ones that give you a backache after sitting for a while.

I leaned my head back against the chair and looked up. There was a ceiling fan that looked like it might fall at the slightest push.

"It's still a while before dark. I haven't seen or heard anything since I arrived, but I don't like moving around cities during the day. Too many windows, too many corners... I'm an easy target. Yeah... I suppose... it wouldn't hurt to stop for a bit..."

It's annoying, but traveling alone makes

you talk to yourself almost constantly. You don't have to be crazy; even knowing there's no one around to hear your words, your thoughts become clearer and more coherent when you let them out as speech. Language is the true manifestation of human reasoning. It's what we are, and if you ask me, it's what truly sets us apart from animals. Of course, I'm just speaking from my humble opinion; as I've said before, I don't really know anything about these things. Yeah, I don't know anything except how to survive and how to hurt, nothing else.

I made sure my backpack was beside my chair and tucked my pistol into my clothes before letting out a sigh and crossing my legs, placing my hands on top. I closed my eyes... and within a minute, I was asleep.

It sounds almost insane to think about taking a nap in a situation like that, now that I reflect on it after so many years.

. . .

The sun was starting to set.

I was jolted awake by a scream of pain.

The kind of broken, guttural scream you'd hear in a low-budget horror movie.

I leaped up from my chair, just as scared as I was confused, and almost instinctively grabbed my 92. The scream was followed by moans and groans, along with different types of yelling and roars of fury. I grabbed my backpack and prepared to get out of there as quickly as possible, filled with fear and no desire to find out what was happening, but I hesitated. It wasn't until about five seconds later that I realized those screams... were getting closer.

I nearly panicked, perhaps more out of a lack of preparation than a lack of control over the situation. Unable to pinpoint exactly where those approaching voices were coming from, I rushed toward the closest hiding spot I could see.

I regretted my decision almost immediately when I slipped into that dark, small, and claustrophobic bathroom. The stench was horrible, and although I

couldn't see anything, I was almost... almost sure there was... something in the bathtub, hidden behind the curtain. All of that added to my discomfort, but what really made me go pale was that when I tried to close the white wooden door, it creaked loudly and mockingly as it swung back open, stopping at an angle of about twenty-five degrees. In my rush, I had broken the lock, and I didn't have time to come up with a better plan.

I tossed the backpack aside, holding the pistol firmly in my right hand, and hid myself in that disgusting bathroom, waiting for whatever was about to happen.

The cowardice that kept me from finding a better hiding place ended up being what saved my life because less than ten seconds later, the front door was kicked open with a bang that felt like someone had poured a bottle of ice water down my spine.

I did my best to disappear into the shadows behind the door, wishing with all my might to become one with the darkness.

I heard a dull thud, like a stone hitting a wall, followed by another moan of pain.

"Don’t kill him."

"He won’t die from that. These motherfuckers can take a beating."

There were four of them. Three spoke German, so I understood what they were saying, although I couldn’t make out the Italian man’s words as he screamed in pain after each blow.

I heard what sounded like a punch, followed by the table sliding and someone stumbling to the ground.

"He doesn't understand us, and we don't understand him. We're wasting our time."

"Words aren’t the only way to make ourselves understood, you know? We’re going to kill him anyway; the least we can do is try to get some information out of him."

"But... just look at him. He’s a nobody.

I'd bet my sister he doesn't even have a rank to show off. These bastards don't get respect unless they prove they deserve it, and none of the ones that matter are out here alone."

"Non so niente! Giuro che loro non mi hanno detto niente!"

"Ugh... I'm sick of the screaming. Yoba, shut him up."

"Yes, sir."

I heard a blow, heavier than the ones before. It was followed by a groan and then a quiet sob of pain.

From what I understand now, two of those three were close—both in rank and friendship—while the third was much newer and simply followed orders.

"What's your plan?"

"What?"

"What do you want to do? If you don't care about getting something useful out of him, what was the point of bringing him

here? You were the one who didn't finish him off."

"No, no. First off, I didn't want to bring him here—that was *your* idea. I just wanted to interrogate him for a bit, but I lost interest when I realized he only spoke Italian. You're the one who's insisting we keep this up."

"There's no point in quitting now. We're here already, so let's try to make something out of it."

"Alright, I'm done."

"Done?"

"Yeah, I'm done. I'm not going to keep wasting my time with this nonsense. I'm just going to sit here while you play interrogator. I'll laugh later back at base when you have to explain why we took so long to get back."

"Calio..."

"No, you're not going to convince me. Go ahead, keep going. Get that information you're so desperate for."

While the two argued, the third kept hitting the poor Italian. He beat him so relentlessly that the man stopped crying out, as if he had resigned himself to his fate.

"...and it's smells like shit here. Where's that stench coming from?"

"Yeah, it's unbearable. It's coming from that bathroom over there. Let's wrap this up quickly and get out of here. Yoba, stop. You're going to kill him. Give him a second to breathe."

Finally, the blows ceased, and I felt a bit of relief knowing they didn't want to approach my hiding spot. Not that I blamed them—the smell really was unbearable. It was a mix of vomit, rotten eggs, and decaying meat.

"Sit him in that chair... no, no, facing this way... good, just like that. Now, leave him to me. Let's see... I can't ask him much, but he'll spill something valuable

once he cracks."

More punches followed.

At last, I dared to peek out from behind the door.

The scene was even more brutal than I'd imagined. Three well-built men against someone so frail he looked like he could lose a fistfight with Angelique.

The one they called Yoba was short but muscular. His arms and back were well-defined even under the thick camo gear he wore. Calio, on the other hand, was almost the opposite—tall but thin, with a bandana covering his face. He sat on the floor with the kind of casual confidence that suggested he was fully in control. I never learned the name of the third man, the one who seemed to be leading them, but I remember he was stocky and had piercing blue eyes.

The leader kept hitting the Italian. The victim wasn't tied up, but he offered no resistance, simply accepting the blows as they came. At that moment, I figured he

was completely broken, that he had resigned himself to death and shut down, waiting for the end.

But something else caught my attention. Despite the younger man calling the leader "sir," it was clear that none of the three were part of any formal military force. Their uniforms were too different from one another, and their weapons were far too varied to be standard issue. The youngest carried an assault rifle on his back—its name escapes me now, but I'd seen French soldiers use it before. Calio had leaned an AK model against the wall next to him, while the leader wielded a CZ-805 in excellent condition.

The beating went on for another ten minutes. Yoba stood by, hands clasped behind his back, unbothered, as if waiting for orders. Calio had lit a cigarette, much to my envy. I watched as the leader grabbed the victim by the hair, yanking him off the chair, only to slam him to the ground and kick him in the face. He was panting and sweating from the exertion, his hands and clothes stained with blood

from the many cuts on the Italian's face.

"This fucker... give us *something!* Point us somewhere, drop a name, anything! I refuse to leave empty-handed!"

"Did you get bored?"

"Yeah, Calio. I'm bored. I'm bored, and my knuckles hurt."

While the man on the floor wiped the blood from his mouth, the leader drew a revolver from the back of his waistband. I don't know what kind it was, but it was short and compact. He didn't need to say a word; just pointing it at the beaten man's head was enough to make him whimper and beg for mercy.

"I hate to say it, but this was a waste of time..."

"Fermati, per favore!"

It was the first thing to come out of that man's lips after so many blows, and even

Calio lifted his head a little to pay closer attention.

The Italian, hands trembling and moving painfully, did his best to take off one of his boots as quickly as he could. From inside the shaft, a carefully folded piece of paper fell, which he grabbed and, without getting off the ground, extended toward the leader.

"Oh... look at that, Calio! Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all."

"Say that after you read whatever's on it."

"Always the pessimist. From trash like this, anything we can get is very, very valuable."

"Think it's coordinates?"

"With some luck, yes. Some idiot must've given him a map to the nearest safehouse in case he got lost. Let's see..."

None of the three were expecting the Italian's counterattack. As the leader bent

down to take the paper, the scrawny man grabbed his wrist and yanked him hard toward him. The bulky man, overbalanced by his own weight, fell clumsily onto his previous victim, dropping the revolver when the handle hit the ground. By the time Yoba reacted, the short-barreled weapon was already in the Italian's hands, and he wasted no time firing three shots at Yoba. The smaller man hit the floor, blood pouring from a bullet wound in his neck and two more in his chest.

"CALIO!"

The gunshots startled the man with the bandana, who, in his rush to grab his rifle, fumbled it with his fingertips, sending it clattering to the ground. He lost precious seconds, during which the leader—struggling to recover the revolver from the man beneath him—was fatally shot in the head. The Italian, who was far more skilled than any of the three, tried to finish off his last remaining foe, but the weight and bulk of the body pinning him down made

it difficult to aim. His last two rounds hit the wall near where Calio had been sitting.

"He was—he was my friend, you son of a bitch! Killing you won't be enough! I'll feed you alive to the dogs!"

The sound of a rifle being cocked echoed through the house, but the gunshot that followed didn't come from Calio's weapon, which was already trained on the Italian.

It came from me. With a single clean shot, I killed Calio. His body slumped lifelessly against the wall, and I stepped out from the bathroom. The Italian's eyes were locked onto mine, a mix of fear and gratitude in his gaze. I took a few steps forward, returned his stare, then holstered my pistol, and he exhaled a deep breath, relieved.

...

I still don't know what made me jump to his aid that time. Maybe I just couldn't bear to witness such cruelty against a single defenseless person, or maybe it was

the admiration I felt watching him cling so fiercely to life, almost managing to overcome all of his attackers. Whatever it was, it pushed me to stain my hands for someone I didn't know at all.

He mumbled a few words of gratitude that I don't clearly remember as he struggled to push the body off and get to his feet. He was completely battered. Despite his pain, he tried to communicate with me, smiling from ear to ear, brimming with energy. I didn't feel great—not after everything that had just happened. All I could do was raise a hand to make him stop and speak in a more subdued tone.

"Sorry, I can't understand what you're saying..."

I could see the disappointment in his face, but it didn't dampen his spirits. Groaning in pain between laughs, he went to rummage through the corpses of the other three.

I glanced at the bodies and scratched my chin. I wasn't sure if I should feel... good or satisfied. I didn't like killing, I still don't. But was it justified this time? I acted out of... humanity, or so I wanted to believe. I saved a defenseless person from a miserable death. It was, if anything, a small sign that there was still something in me capable of acting for someone else's benefit. Yet... it didn't feel right.

The man spoke to me, saying things I couldn't understand at the time. Today, looking back, I can piece together that he was telling me how he and his group had been ambushed by the three men, and he was the only one to survive. That he was out looking for supplies to take back to his base, where the rest of his companions were waiting. I watched him pick up the rifle that Calio had been carrying, checking the chamber before turning back to look at me. He hesitated for a moment but then approached again, almost timidly.

"Vieni con noi! Sei in gamba e ti devo

un favore. Ti offriamo qualcosa da mangiare e bere. Ti piace l'alcol?"

"... Sorry, I really don't understand."

"Ah..."

He inhaled sharply, pressing a hand to his chest, trying his best to make himself understood in broken English.

"Come with me! Group! Uh... companions!"

"Oh, that's what you mean... no, I don't think... I'm not looking for a group."

"We are strong!"

He slapped his chest twice, open palm. Then, with complete confidence and a strange sense of trust, he spoke the last word I would ever hear from his mouth.

"Amere!"

I felt the air leave my lungs.

Seeing that I wasn't reacting, he made a

gesture of resignation, then nodded once more in thanks.

He turned his back on me.

Checked Yoba's pockets and kept walking.

I watched him go...

He stepped over the leader's corpse and headed for the door.

...

I took my 92 in my right hand.

Lined up his back between the sights.

Waited.

I thought maybe he'd turn around once more, but he didn't.

He placed a hand on the doorknob...

I fired twice, and then three more times once I saw him hit the floor.

He didn't even scream or groan, just faded away like a flame snuffed out by lack of air.

I leaned against the wall and let myself become part of it for a while, suffocating in the stench of shit and gunpowder.

I was right—I shouldn't have even tried. There was no point in trying to be good, in acting with humanity. Everyone out there was a piece of filth, myself included. Each and every one of us deserved whatever fate was coming. There were no good guys, no innocents. In the end, it was just those who survived and those who didn't. No one deserved saving. And if there were people who did deserve protection, they weren't worth the risk.

"... it's almost dark..."

I took the CZ-805 and a couple of magazines. I also stole Calio's cigarettes. I lit one after leaving the house and walked away, trying not to think too much about it. Trying not to think too much about anything. That small experience had taught me that thinking would only bring me trouble.

"... you have to kill them before they kill you..."

I filled my lungs with smoke and kept moving.

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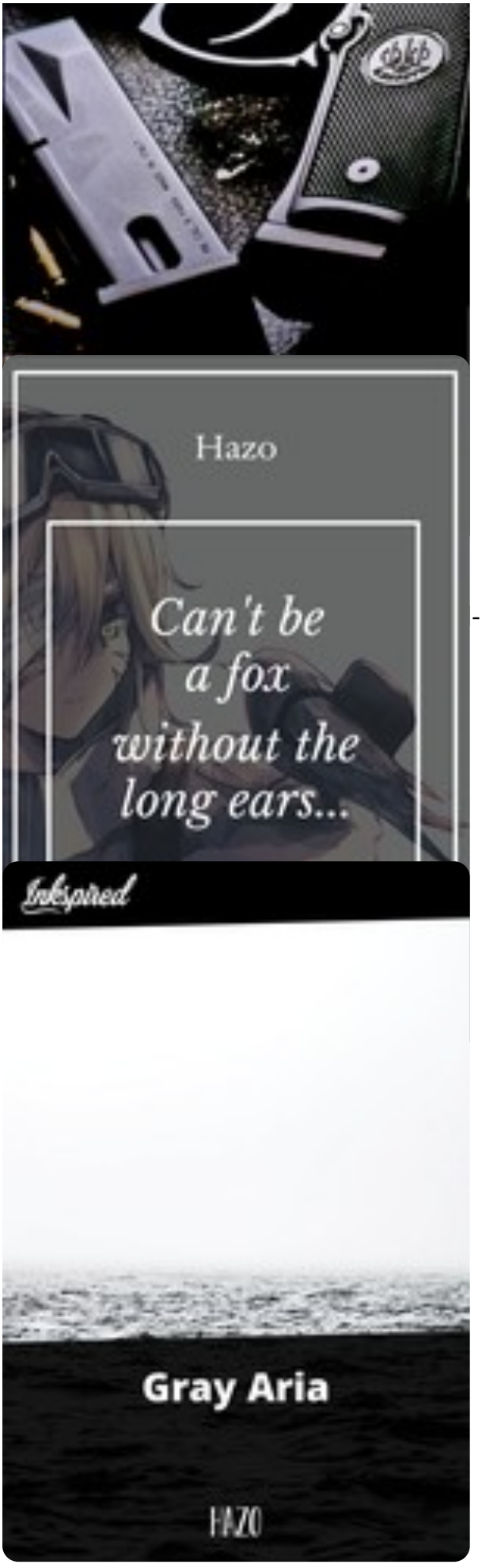

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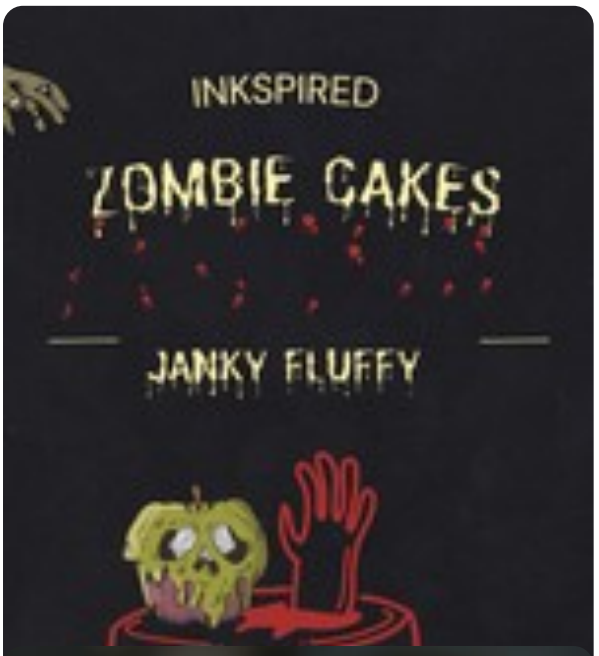

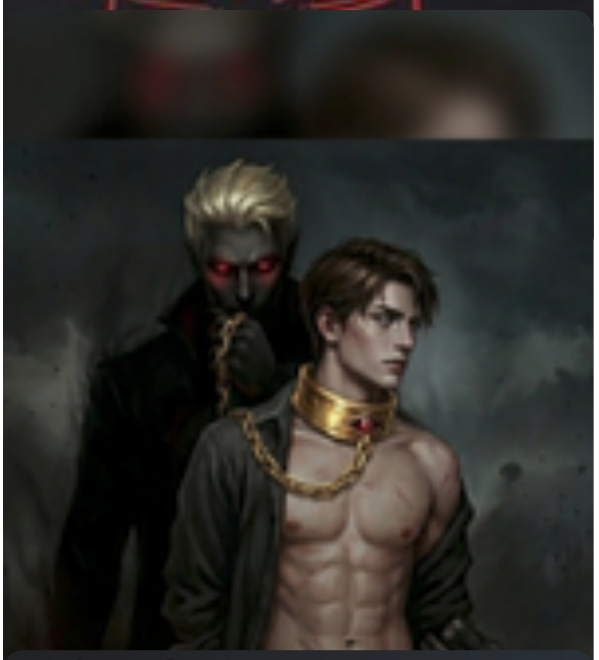

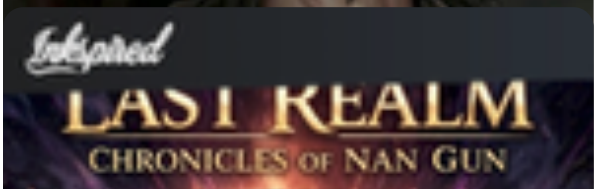

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